JANUARY 17, 1985

Don't rush me this morning. I'm way out of my element in a town called Homestead on the Florida Peninsula close to the Everglades. I'm waiting for the sun to grow hot enough to drive the mosquitoes into the shade, so I can make a getaway in my car.

Mosquitoes are so fierce in these parts that they fight among themselves when they can't find a tender hided upland tourist to feast upon. Monster mosquitoes that leer through the picture windows of motels at the guests. Big black-winged blood suckers that, if they had tail feathers, would make the American bald eagle look like a symbol for a tearoom instead of being our national emblem.

The Project I'm on, however, only involves mosquitoes in a secondary way. I'm on a self assigned mission to study the southern cattle in their natural environment. Once these marshland cow herders hear the drouth is getting over in Texas, they'll be shipping calves and yearlings up there at a rate that'll make the fastest hotcake cook in all of Miami think he's wearing handcuffs.

Before that happens (and that's the way it was after the Big Drouth in the '50s) I want to see these calves on their home ranges. In about 1957 or '58 the Shortgrass Country was close to 8.5 feet deep in southern bred calves. Counting the ones in the sick pens and hastily organized field hospitals, we probably had about as many swamp models as some of the southern states were running.

Where we were definitely in the lead was in pneumonia and related shipping fever. Penicillin and streptomycin became such hot items that the spot market on these drugs was changed on an hourly schedule. Viruses and germs floated around the pasturelands until the yellow-eyed blackbirds were so sick and stiff they had to walk instead of fly off their feed grounds. To this very day during calm mornings on some outfits you can still hear the echoes of that awful wheezing and coughing that decimated the herds. Long after the last of the cattle were shipped, herders continued to spook at the sight of a syringe or a bottle of medicine.

So, during the holidays, I decided I'd come down and study the cattle before they were all stirred up and full of diesel fumes and knocked out from the change in altitude. Purely to acclimate myself, I spent the first two days of the trip studying the beach area at a resort hotel in Tampa Bay. Like the cattle I've seen, these beach people are from everywhere and of every bloodline. Unlike the cattle, the people don't seem to have ever been culled for age or waistlines.

One thing the sunbathers have in common is that clothes must bind them and make them uncomfortable, because they don't wear much more than a light strand of bathing suit and a heavy application of suntan oil. About the best way to describe their costumes is to say their hats and their sunglasses cover more of their body than the rest of their attire put together. I don't think they sleep much at night as they nearly always have their eyes closed when they're lying out on the sand.

The secret to transporting these cattle, I think, is to be set up with oxygen tents ready to pump salt spray and marsh grass fumes into their faces. Also, bring along a

few alligators and .shorebirds and plenty of mosquitoes to make them feel at home. I don't know of a background that'd be as beautiful as parts of this country are. I guess they'd have some homesickness in spite of whatever was done.

When the inside of my suitcase has dried, I'm going to head north. I do plan on interviewing the room clerk before I check out. I heard him cough the other evening just like one of those steer calves do before they get sick. If he's not a heavy smoker, he might break the whole case.